

Marikana Commission of Inquiry: From Narratives Towards History

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Abstract

The Marikana Commission of Inquiry was established following the killing of 34 Lonmin strikers by South African police on 16 August 2012. This article provides a substantive review of the Commission's Report, released in June 2015. It highlights the Commission's assessment that a decision made by top generals the evening before the massacre was 'the decisive cause' of the deaths. This and other findings against the police are contrasted with failure to make any recommendations for prosecution. Evidence presented to the Commission is used to draw different conclusions from those in the report. In particular, the article argues that the initial killings, broadcast live on television, were a consequence of planning by the operational commander, rather than a response to workers' aggression. Culpability for the massacre is also considered. While the narrative presented by the police was discredited, that articulated by workers was largely vindicated. However, this did not restrain the Commission from making comments hostile to the workers, and this antipathy is viewed as a factor leading to errors of judgement. The article was written in honour of Colin Murray. Resonating with his work, it ends by urging historians to take workers' voices seriously, something that Lonmin, the police, media reporters, and the Commission conspicuously failed to do.

This article is based on a lecture honouring the memory of Colin Murray, delivered in 2014. Murray was a committed scholar, 'a kind of Marxist by conviction' according to one reviewer, and he sympathised with those he studied.¹ A. Atmore, 'Review of *Families Divided*', *African Affairs*, 81, 324 (1982), p. 449. [View all notes](#) He did not have an opportunity to write about Marikana, but I know he was 'shocked and dismayed' by what happened.² E-mail from Kammila Naidoo, 14 February 2016. [View all notes](#)

Colin wrote about mine workers, but not in isolation. His were gendered workers, they had families, and they were located within global capitalism. His early work on Basotho mine workers was especially pertinent. In his seminal *Families Divided*, he argued that conditions of existence were derived not from capitalist accumulation in general, but from 'the particular historical circumstances under which Basotho [had] been incorporated as wage labourers, together with their distinctive culture and their relative political autonomy, into the system of racial and class oppression in South Africa'.³ C. Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 176. [View all notes](#) In a subsequent article, he made a related argument, that, in order to make sense of everyday life, one must have a grasp of two temporal dimensions: the 'developmental cycle', which operated mainly at household level and was the principal focus of his empirical work; and class analysis, rooted, in this

instance, in South Africa's industrial capitalism.⁴⁴ C. Murray, 'Class, Gender and the Household: The Developmental Cycle in Southern Africa', *Development and Change*, 18, 2 (1987), pp. 235–49. He added (p. 49) that the former 'must be applied in a manner that is subordinate to and not alternative to a class analysis'. [View all notes](#) This approach would be especially valuable for any rounded history of Marikana mine workers. Nearly all those killed came from rural areas, where they had families and where most were buried.⁵⁵ Out of the 34 men killed in the massacre, 26 were buried in the Eastern Cape, four in Lesotho, two locally, one in Gauteng, and one in Swaziland. See P. Alexander, T. Lekgowa, B. Mmope, L. Sinwell and B. Xezwi, *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* (Johannesburg, Jacana Media, 2012), pp. 196–9. [View all notes](#)

With a keen eye and a dialectical approach, Colin was able to identify and situate key changes under way from the early 1970s – specifically, increased wages coupled with the rise of structural unemployment, and the replacement of the traditional migrant by the 'professional miner' who spent less time at home and more at the mine. This new miner was never adequately compensated for his (and, later, her) commitment and skills, and, with the development of secondary households in mining areas, capitalism created combustible materials that fuelled the Marikana conflict.

Colin understood the importance of strikes and politics, and he would have revelled in developing insights about the post-apartheid state in the wake of action by Marikana's insurgent workers. It is a great shame that we do not have him with us now, to draw on his superb fieldwork and his methodological and analytical framing to make sense of the massacre – to help us write its history.